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AGING VETERANS DO THEIR PATRIOTIC DUTY

By STEVE DUNLEAVY

March 23, 2003 -- THEY were small in number but giant of heart.

I was in Heckscher Park in Huntington, L.I., 40 miles from the hooples in Manhattan who have volunteered to join the whine-and-tease club of President Jacques Ch-Iraq.

One thousand men, women and children with flags in their hands and true grit in their hearts came out to support the guys and gals who are fighting in Iraq.

Maj. Gen. Anthony Kropp, a veteran of Vietnam, Desert Storm and Enduring Freedom, is now retired, but his last boss was Gen. Tommy Franks.

He was asked about the demonstration in Manhattan. He said, "It is diversity, but I believe a lot of troops believe they are fighting in Iraq for the right of the demonstrators to disagree."

And there in the crowd were two old boys, hair whiter than snow. They were Navy men John Raggie, 82, who served on the destroyer USS Beale in World War II, and Joe Buhler, 80, who served on the USS Hope.

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These aged heroes, whose middles had thickened as their hair thinned, talked about the battlegrounds of blood and guts as if they were reeling off names of places they had visited on vacation.

The ramrod behind yesterday's show of patriotism in Suffolk, the county with the second-largest population of veterans in the country, was Rep. Steve Israel, a Long Island Democrat.

Buhler's partner in war, the old fellow Raggie, said, "Just remember what Congressman Israel says, that it's OK to wave the flag when they're going there, but make sure you wave the flag when they come back."

The loyal and the true were singing "God Bless America," and I was grateful I was in Huntington, rather than in Manhattan to hear and witness the charade of lesser men and women.



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